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AUTHOR Sorenson, Marilou R.
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ABSTRACT

Using children's literature as an integral part of the reading curriculum can lead children to want to read more, as they discover the pleasure of reading. Reading-readiness skills (comprehension and auditory and visual discrimination) and primary and intermediate skills (syntax, context in word attack, comprehension, critical reading, and practice with language) can be developed by having children read literature rather than readers. In a pilot reading program in a Salt Lake City grade school, children's literature was used as reading material for 18 fourth-grade children who were reading one or two years below grade level. After 25 school days, during which the children spent twice the usual amount of time in reading and reading-related activities, test results showed gains of one to three years. In addition, children showed more determination and confidence in other studies, read more at home, and, for the first time, indicated a preference for reading as an activity. (JM)

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Marilou R. Sorenson

A LEGACY OF LITERATURE

The tall young man pushed my grocery cart to the car and began stashing them inside. I wasn't watching, really. I glanced at my watch anxiously and made mental notes as to the possibility of meat loaf for dinner (since I had failed to take the pork chops out of the freezer that morning). The boy closed the trunk and said, "I think I know you. Weren't you my 3rd grade teacher?" His face and 6 foot size was out of context. "I'm Philip," and he extended his hand on a long gangly arm.

How soon we forget the Philips in our teaching but how long they remain in our lives!

Yes! I remembered Philip. Small, unattentive, low achiever in reading with deficiencies in most of the other curriculum areas as well. I had gotten acquainted with Philip early that year. He had set a fire in the classroom at 9:15 the first day of school. I remembered Philip!

"I was probably a real pain for you that year?" he said with a bit of a question in his voice.

"Well, Philip, it did take us awhile to get going in third grade. You weren't that bad!" I lied! If Philip wasn't in trouble you could count on him being absent. He scribbled in his books, put his reader in the drinking fountain and was referred for testing.

"I never did do much in elementary school and what I did do was all wrong -" his voice trailed into a memory. "But the one thing I'll never forget is when you used to read to us. I can remember you reading "Island of the Blue Dolphins," and I used to read ahead each night so I'd know what was coming

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in the story. I know I'll never forget that book!"

So Philip remembered, did he? "Island of the Blue Dolphins," "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," "Wind in the Willows." And he named others that day as we leaned against the car in front of the supermarket. Impossible as it seems he had read them all.

And now Philip is entering college. He's entering into business and then law. He asked if he can visit me in my office on the University campus. Perhaps when he comes I can entice him to read "Grey Wolf" this year's Newbery Award winner or perhaps we'll just discuss "Island of the Blue Dolphins" some more.

Lloyd Alexander described literature in this way: "A good book is one that after I've read it I can say, "I know how the author feels." A truly great book is one that after I've read I can say, "I know how the author feels. I'll never be the same again!"

If we could just capture for every child/every adult that we teach the joy of the story, the thrill of an exciting plot or the "ah---" at the end of the book!

Many children and adults who have gone through the experiences of a reading program never become habitual readers. Cecelia has been my friend for years. She is a wife of a Doctor, President of Jr. League and an outstanding leader in many areas of church and civic life. I was most surprised the day she confided to me her problem - a problem she had carried for forty years. She could not read. No one knew except her husband and now I knew and I was being asked in a pleading voice to help.

Cecelia is a gourmet cook. She carried her recipe card to the market and matched the words when she bought herbs and spices. She had taken her driver's test orally pretending her English was not too good. She had never read a bedtime story to her children when they were young. She had lied and made excuses all her life to cover up her lack of skill. And so we began slowly, painfully, the sessions often ending in tears. It was hard for me to relate to a task such as this. And then I took a graduate statistics class and my dilemma with "T-scores" and such made me much more patient. She audited my Children's Literature class and struggled through "Charlotte's Web." She audited it again and read "Julia of the Wolves" and "From the Mixed Up Files." By the third quarter audit she was a pro. What she hadn't read she had heard me talk about and she became very verbal and quite well informed. She visited the Children's Center - a school for emotionally handicapped children - and read picture books to them twice a week.

Success in reading has not been easy for her. There have been gains and plateaus, but most recently she called and in a tearful but very joyful voice told me about the discussion she had just had with her son about "Chocolate War." They had both finished it and were having a sharing experience that she'd never had with her children before.

The figures published annually indicate that our adult population is not a reading minded people. We would be fooling ourselves if we believed that our elementary children surge through mounds and mounds of books in ecstatic joy.

If the purpose of the experiences in reading is to not merely run children through a series of readers, but rather to make readers out of children, then we ought to look seriously at the material we use in our reading curriculum. "The man sat on the tan mat. See the man on the tan mat," may not be significant nor relevant material, but a poem "Who has seen the wind - neither you nor I," or the tales of Anansia, may be.

The premise of using Children's Literature as an integral part of the reading curriculum is this: Don't tie readers to readers, let them read!

From the beginning readiness skills can be taught with Children's Literature. "Someday Said Mitchell" by Barbara Williams is a meaningful listening experience, and rhythmic vocabulary patterns can be extended in lilting "Pop Corn and Ma Goodness."

Picture books are an unique experience with the artistic visual and spoken word which help in the discrimination skills of visual sequencing and auditory recall. The foundation skills of comprehension can be set through attending to details, interpreting feelings in the story.

Needed primary and intermediate skills are equally handled through the use of Children's Literature. Syntax, context in word attack, comprehension, critical reading and certainly the practice with language is available through literature for children. In one school in Salt Lake City a short-termed program was piloted using Children's Literature as reading for fourth graders. The teachers in this school knew that every time the children faced a book, they faced failure. They realized that books were an insurmountable puzzle. They knew, too, that if the children finished the fourth grade puzzled about

reading they would continue to have failures as they faced fifth and sixth grade and entered junior high and high school. They felt that fourth was a crucial year and thought that if they could catch up now, in the fourth grade they'd find the rest of their schooling profitable. The Back-Up Program, as it was formally called, was planned to break up this infinite corridor of despair in reading.

The program was planned with 18 fourth grade children who according to their teacher's evaluation and standardized testing were reading a year or two below grade level. A current Silvaroli Reading Diagnostic Score revealed that no children were on grade level and that at least half of the group were two grades below level. The Stanford Diagnostic Test showed that 16 of the 18 children were at least one year behind in reading comprehension. The records of the Economy Co Basal test recorded placements as low as the primer level and none higher than 2.2. The Back-Up Program was implemented step-by-step. First it was planned to stop all morning activities for the 18 children and instead of the usual 80 minute reading and language arts programs, reading and reading-related activities would comprise twice that time, or nearly three hours. Second, instead of four reading activities, as had originally been planned, seven reading activities would be involved, each of which would be developed as a learning center, with self instructional and teacher supervised reading instruction. Basically the new Back-Up Program entailed 180 minutes of instruction in reading with seven different learning centers, running for 25 school days.

Yet, there was much more to the program than just doubling the time in reading. One area of the room was re-decorated with highly-motivational materials. The children were rotated through these activities in twos and fours in order to capitalize on the already proven value of peer-partner teaching and learning. Games for word attack and skill building were zeroed-in on with individual diagnosis for needs. But the Back-Up Program did not concentrate on skills alone, the teachers wanted the children to realize the reason for learning to read is to read books. So there were many uses of real reading and the source of this was through literature; making the books available, enticing and comfortable for children who had not succeeded before. The teachers coupled literature centers with stations where children would dictate their own stories. They knew the real purpose of literature was felt when a child became an author and his own book was added to the children's literature collection.

There were two ways to evaluate the Back-Up Program. The first was statistically, that is, in the 25 days did anything happen to the children's reading scores? On the Stanford Diagnostic Test reading comprehension went up .21 on the average and in some cases there were gains of over a year. In every case children who were nearly two years below the fourth grade reading level made average grade scores of 3.2, or an average gain of 6.5 months after 25 days of school work. The average grade gain was .21 months for one months work, where in the previous four years of school they had made a one month's progress for every two months of school. It was most interesting to note that according to the Stanford Reading Diagnostic Score the Back-Up

Program most benefited those children who needed it most. On the Silvaroli Reading Diagnostic again the best results were found with those children who began the program with the lowest scores. In five instances there were gains of one year for the 25 days of work. According to the teachers involved the results on the post tests of the Basal Reading Placement were spectacular. As in the previous tests the greatest gains were seen by those children who had been the lowest on the pre-tests. For all children reading on the primer level gains were seen from one to three years. Generally advance was made two or three levels within the basal system. So, the teachers and consultants felt, according to statistics, the program was a success.

In the affective domain the most noticed result was the confidence seen in reading. Children who had steered away from reading, now read, re-read and orally shared with peers. In an attitude scale recorded as a post-measure many children selected reading as a preferred activity where in a similar pre-test none had chosen reading as a preferred activity. The spill-over into other subjects was noticeable also. The children on the Back-Up Program now attacked their other studies with much more determination and confidence. Parents also confirmed that children were reading more at home. Literature had become a part of their life and they were eager to share it with others.

Perhaps the reason we have children who read only when they have to, or perhaps the reason why we have children who fail at the task is because they have never felt the joy of a book. They don't know what it's like to have the heart race faster during an adventure - i.e. Miyax finds herself on an

ice flow with a pack of wild wolves. They haven't experienced the tears that well up and hurt the throat - the dog has been raised and is killed and must be buried. They can't relate to the pain and frustration - a teen-age girl finds out her feet are as large as the boys. They can't laugh and enjoy"Higgelty, Piggelty, Pop", "Bread and Jam For Francis", or "Horton Hatches the Egg."

Perhaps they are the ones - the ones who read little - who have never felt the impact of a theme, felt the beauty of a fine style in writing or found information they needed in a book. One thing is certain. Literature cannot do this if experience with books is a hit-or-miss, an incidental learning - a story hour on occasion, a library period once a week or the direction (which sometimes sounds like a threat) "when you get your work done, get a book and read!" A teacher may develop a guilty feeling spending time reading literature to the children when the curriculum guide dictates work book pages or doing a unit on the planets. And yet the things that may be the most educational, the most affective, the most lasting, may not be contained on a worksheet or a unit plan.

I'm sure Philip does not remember - nor care - that we visited the fire station that year and studied the American Indian. What is important is that we read together, we shared, we touched minds through literature.

I'm not sure how many of our children will recall or cherish "the man who sat on the tan mat". But I'm very sure they will live and internalize Pooh's Birthday Party and Charlotte and Templeton.

The one legacy I would like to leave with my students, and students of my students, is the feeling of that joyous moment,"I'll never forget that book! I'll never be the same again!"